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ABSTRACT

This issue contains five articles about assessment in adult literacy programs. The first article, "Living Literacy: Rethinking Adult Learner Assessment" (Susan L. Lytle), focuses on developing alternative forms of assessment such as literacy portfolios to identify changes in four dimensions of adult literacy over the course of literacy programs: learners' beliefs, practices, processes/products, and goals/plans. In "CALPEP: The California Adult Learner Progress Evaluation Process" (Al Bennett), the objectives, key components, and use of CALPEP are outlined and a sample page is presented. Project REACH, a basic skills enhancement program for New York state employees, is profiled in "Assessing Workplace Literacy: Asking New Questions" (Carol D. Young). Discussed in the article "An Assessment Overview" (Kate Toms) are the problems involved in gaining acceptance of alternative assessment practices such as portfolio assessment and the comparative validity of alternative and standardized assessment. The benefits and potential drawbacks of using portfolio assessment in adult literacy programs are considered in "Portfolio Assessment" (Barbara Van Horn). Also included is a brief description of available portfolio assessment software. (MN)

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Assessment Issue

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Living Literacy: Rethinking Adult Learner Assessment

Susan L. Lytle
University of Pennsylvania

Many literacy practitioners—teachers, tutors, and administrators—have become interested in new forms of assessment, in alternative ways of capturing the complex interactions of teaching and learning and their outcomes for adult learners. But rethinking learner assessment involves more than new methods; it also entails rethinking what we understand about literacy, about learners, about learning, and about what counts as progress. In this article, adapted from a longer piece (Lytle, 1991), I present a framework teachers and tutors can use to develop approaches to assessing literacy learning in adulthood that are congruent with the ways literacy is lived in families, workplaces, and communities.

As practitioners work together to learn about literacy development from and with adults there are many implications for revising our current curricula, programs, and policies. This framework invites discussion and debate, and particularly, conversations with learners and the rich documentation of the practices of teaching and learning.

Portraying Adults as Literacy Learners

How we imagine literacy development in adulthood depends on our underlying assumptions about the characteristics, abilities and problems of adult learners. There is considerable evidence that the commonplace images of incompetence and marginalization, of adults who are weak and embarrassed and who seek the 'privacy' and anonymity of one-to-one tutoring, do not match the adults who actually come to literacy programs bringing with them self-concepts, interests, and literacy abilities as varied as those of any other group in the population. In an oft-cited study, Fingeret (1983) has shown how adults operate within complex social networks in which they are interdependent, offering skills of their own in exchange for the literacy skills of others within their network. She concluded that "illiterate" adults do not necessarily fit the stereotypes of dependency, weakness and failure affixed to them by mainstream culture.

In accordance with the public images of helplessness and incompetence, many adult learners initially present themselves at literacy programs as unable to read and write. At the same time, however, they often arrive with prior experiences with authentic reading and writing as well as stories recounting extraordinary endeavors to teach themselves strategies for using written language in their daily lives. Often these efforts have been collaborative, utilizing a network of family or friends and requiring that these learners experiment, take risks, and assume increasing responsibility for their own education as writers and readers.

To understand literacy development in adulthood, we also need to look beyond the experiences of adults enrolled in programs to explore the functions and uses of literacy by adults in a range of contexts including families, workplaces, churches, and community organizations. Assuming competency rather than deficiency means looking outside of programs to identify instances of adults with limited abilities in reading and writing functioning in complex social environments requiring a range of intellectual and social skills.

The purposeful use and development of literacy needs to be seen within the broad contours of a person's personal and social world. And although much of the theoretical literature has suggested that adult learning is characterized by independence and self-direction (e.g., andragogy as developed by Knowles, 1970; 1979 and others), there is some concern that these studies of adults as learners have been culturally specific, i.e., limited to lower-middle, middle and upperclass white Americans (Brookfield, 1986). There may be diverse routes into literacy, and in different cultures or social groupings such learning may revolve more around joint work and interdependence than around individual initiative.

What Counts as Learning — In Programs and Out

Portraying adult literacy learners as participants in diverse social and cultural contexts involving a range of literacy practices provides an alternative to the current public image of adult learners as incompetent individuals needing remediation in a set of pre-determined technical skills. This more complex view of adults as learners and of literacy as practices and critical reflection leads next to concerns about how adult literacy learning is constructed in different programs. At issue here is what adult

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learners, and the designers of literacy programs, count as learning, both in and out of formal instructional contexts.

Just as in K-12 schooling nationwide, adult literacy programs differ from each other dramatically, and thus offer to the adults who attend them qualitatively different opportunities to learn. Programs differ in the extent to which they emphasize solitary or more collaborative opportunities for learning, and in their emphasis on teaching predetermined sets of skills or, alternately, in building on the literacy practices of everyday life. Learning in what have been identified as individually-oriented programs (Fingeret, 1984), for example, is organized to empower adults through learning literacy skills with services planned and provided by a staff of professionals and volunteers. Community-based programs (Fingeret, 1984) are more content-oriented in their focus on community issues and on the ability of groups and individuals to empower themselves through collective action. Some family literacy programs are geared to what Auerbach (1989, 1990) calls the "transmission of school practices model," while others build on the cultural, linguistic and literacy practices already and always ongoing in family life. Sometimes it is difficult to see immediately what counts as learning in a program. So called "real-world materials" may be used as texts for traditional school tasks, e.g., to teach technical skills in the abstract, or they may be grounded in the learner's immediate experiences and provide occasions for dealing with issues related to using literacy in the world.

"The work so far suggests that adults' beliefs may function as the core or critical dimension in their movement toward enhanced literacy."

Participatory educational approaches, as described by Fingeret and Jurmo (1989) involve learners not only in negotiating the curriculum but also in program management and governance, thereby providing opportunities for developing literacy within the program as an organizational, not just an instructional setting. As Fingeret and others have pointed out, adult learners bring to these opportunities prior experiences as participants in oral subcultures where they work interdependently, learning, sharing, and using information to provide mutual assistance. These rich patterns of social interaction often go unrecognized as contexts for literacy learning, as the skills of collaboration are unrecognized as resources for learning.

Participatory literacy education is centered in learners' "characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds and needs" and in the collaborative relationships among learners and program staff. While in traditional programs learners are conceived as recipients, in participatory education they "define, create and maintain" the program. Although relatively few programs currently can be characterized as fully participatory, and little research has been conducted on adult learning in participatory contexts, the profiles of literacy development of adults participating in such programs are likely to be radically different from profiles of development in traditional settings. Participatory models challenge the conventional wisdom about what so-called low literate adult learners can accomplish in their daily lives.

Dimensions of Literacy Development

The four dimensions of literacy we have been investigating include adults' beliefs, practices, processes/products, and goals/plans. Beliefs includes adults' theories or knowledge about language, literacy, teaching and learning. By practices, we refer to the range and variation of learners' literacy-related activities in their everyday lives. By processes we mean adult learners' repertoires of ways to manage reading and writing tasks and the products of these transactions. Finally, plans signal what adults themselves indicate they want to learn, including their short and long-term goals and how they plan and interact to further attainment of these goals. By collecting data with adults while they participate in programs, we are describing the range and variation of each dimension and exploring their interconnections. This process entails looking at both intra-individual differences (variation in one adult over time) and inter-individual differences (variation across adults).

Adult Learners' Beliefs

The first dimension of literacy development focuses on learners' beliefs, adults' own evolving conceptual frameworks or theories about language, literacy, teaching and learning. This aspect of literacy development foregrounds adults' prior experiences, attitudes and current understandings of: their own social, cognitive and linguistic resources for learning and of themselves as gendered, raced and classed readers, writers and learners; the forms and functions of written and oral language; the nature of reading and writing processes in relation to different tasks, texts and contexts; and the ways that writing and reading are or should be acquired, learned and taught. The work so far suggests that adults' beliefs may function as the core or critical

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CALPEP: The California Adult Learner Progress Evaluation Process

Al Bennett
Literacy Specialist, California State Library

What is CALPEP?

CALPEP is the learner progress assessment tool used by the California State Library in the California Literacy Campaign (CLC). It is unique in the world of assessing adult literacy progress, and because of its uniqueness it may easily be misunderstood.

- CALPEP is learner-focused, goal-oriented and user-friendly.
- CALPEP is not a test! There is no pass, fail or reference to grade levels.
- CALPEP offers tutors and learners the opportunity to review what they've done during the past six months, and to plan where they want to go next.
- CALPEP provides valuable information for tutor and learner as well as for literacy program management at the state and local levels.
- CALPEP provides uniform, generic data on learner progress that is independent of specific curricula that can be aggregated at the local and state levels.

CALPEP provides information of value at three levels. First, it helps the tutor and learner understand what progress is being made in the learner's literacy development. Second, it provides information that can be used at the local program level to strengthen such activities as tutor training and tutor/learner support. And third, it is used at the State level to provide information to the State Library, the California Library Services Board and the legislature on the effectiveness of the California Literacy Campaign.

CALPEP was designed to provide a semi-annual summary of learning outcomes for adult literacy learners in the public libraries participating in the CLC. The CLC is a public library-based, volunteer literacy program funded under the California Library Literacy Services Act and the Families for Literacy Act, both of which amended the California Library Services Act. The CLC offers basic literacy (as opposed to English as a second language) instructions for out-of-school youth and adults. There are currently 91 participating public library jurisdictions throughout the state of California.

"CALPEP was designed to provide a semi-annual summary of learning outcomes for adult literacy learners."

The development of CALPEP began in 1987 when the California State Librarian awarded a contract to Educational Testing Services (ETS) to recommend a means of evaluating learner progress in the CLC. ETS surveyed the 46 library literacy programs then in the CLC, and concluded that although each reported some kind of learner outcome assessment, most were implemented by tutors to meet the tutor's perceived need, often using informal means. However, there was no single measure of learner progress used in local programs that ETS could recommend for use in all CLC programs. The lack of agreement on a single learner progress assessment tool was in part a result of the California State Library staff's encouragement of diverse approaches to literacy development in the various local programs. Since CLC's beginning in 1984, staff had emphasized innovation and responsiveness to community needs rather than use of a uniform statewide curriculum.

ETS undertook a nationwide search for an appropriate assessment instrument. They gathered data from 31 different programs in 18 states in a telephone survey. The national findings paralleled what had been found in California: there was dissatisfaction with standardized tests traditionally used to measure learner progress in adult basic education/literacy programs, even though many used such tests to comply with grant requirements.

ETS selected two programs from the broader national survey for in-depth study. They were chosen because of their creative efforts to deal with the dissatisfaction in standardized testing. ETS then developed a "Discussion Paper" based on their findings that provided the basis for a seminar of experts selected because of their involvement in addressing the issues raised during the nationwide study.

ETS also worked with a Field Advisory Committee of CLC Coordinators from eight geographical regions of California. They provided feedback to the various drafts of CALPEP that ETS developed in 1987 and 1988.

How CALPEP Works

Tutors and learners complete a CALPEP assessment in June and December. Completed forms are sent to each participating library's office where the information is entered into a database: CLC-Base (a database management system developed by ETS as a comprehensive literacy managements tool), or a separate CALPEP software program now under development.

Semi-annual CALPEP reports complement monthly reports tutors submit on numbers of instructional sessions, hours of instruction provided and anecdotal comments about learner progress. Tutors keep copies of CALPEP reports to use in each successive CALPEP assessment so activities and

accomplishments can be compared to plans made at the previous assessment.

Each local literacy program office downloads data gathered semi-annually to a disk that is sent to a central location for statewide analysis. ETS has provided this service since 1989. Reports entitled "CALPEP: Analysis of Adult Learner Progress" are prepared for the State Librarian, and for each of the local literacy programs.

CALPEP was reviewed and revised by ETS through a participatory process in 1993. The new version limits the scope of CALPEP to only the semi-annual reporting cycle, rather than a complete literacy program management format as in the original version. It has been formatted to be more user-friendly, with the addition of graphics in the sections assessing reading and writing practices. The former analytical framework of R-W-S-P-A (Readiness, Words, Sentences, Paragraphs and Application) was dropped and replaced with five options relating development of facility in reading and writing, and three options in progress toward goal accomplishment. The new version has met with enthusiastic reception by CLC participants.

For further information on the use of CALPEP in the California Literacy Campaign, contact:

Al Bennett, Literacy Specialist
California State Library
1001 Sixth Street, Suite 300
Sacramento CA 95814
Tel: 916-322-0377
Fax: 916-323-1870

For futher information on ETS's involvement, or on CLC-Base, contact:

Educational Testing Service
2 Renaissance Square
40 North Central Avenue, Suite 700
Phoenix AZ 85004
Tel: 602-252-5400
Fax: 602-252-7499

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In 1991 the LVA-NYS Board of Directors identified learner assessment as a priority area for research and enhanced affiliate technical assistance. This led LVA-NYS on an extensive search for existing alternative learner assessment instruments and approaches. This culminated in identifying CALPEP as the primary instrument designed for and being used by volunteer tutors and learners to collaboratively assess the student's progress toward reading and writing goals. It allows students to report on changes in their literacy practices, on changes in their perceptions of their literacy progress, and ultimately on the impact that literacy improvement has made on their lives.

LVA-NYS is piloting a revised edition of CALPEP as part of the federally mandated Indicators of Program Quality with the New York State Education Department.

We gratefully acknowledge the permission of the California State Library to use CALPEP.

Sample page from CALPEP (adapted by LVA-NYS)

Reading Materials

"Here are some things that adults read, that we could read in our sessions together. Tell me if you read these kinds of things. If you do, how often do you read each of these per week, and how hard is it for you to read each one?"

	How often per week. . .						How hard to read. . .		
	N/A	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	7	Easy	A little	Very
Labels/Instructions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Street names/Traffic signs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Bank ATMs/Pay check stubs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Mail/Bills/Letters	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Books you read to your child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Notes from school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Religious materials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Legal items (leases, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Newspapers/TV Guide	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Work materials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Books/Comics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Menus/Recipes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Magazines	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Other (phone books, bus schedules, etc)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○
Anything not listed here? _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	○	○	○

Did this list remind you of anything you would like to read during our sessions together?

_____

Person Reading: Tutor _____ Student _____ (Please check one.)

Student-Tutor Code # : _____ Date: _____

***Living Literacy:* continued from page 2**

dimension in their movement toward enhanced literacy. As beliefs are articulated and sometimes restructured through interactions with teachers, texts and other learners, the other dimensions of development – adults' practices, processes, goals and plans – begin to reflect and then in turn to inform these changes. Although these developmental processes appear to be reciprocal and recursive, there is evidence that beliefs may be a primary source or anchor for other dimensions of growth.

Understanding adults' belief systems also requires paying attention, initially and over time, to where these beliefs have come from, as adults recount and reinterpret their past experiences with language and learning by describing attitudes, expectations and self-attributions acquired during previous schooling. One male literacy student, for example, accounted for his own school failure by saying: "It's just like I had told you when we first got started that I didn't learn in school because I was bad – but it's not because I was dumb." Other adults remember the routines of traditional lessons as well as experiences of punishment and isolation.

Documenting changes in beliefs poses at least two important problems which can only be mentioned here but merit further examination. One is the difficulty many adults experience in articulating their underlying assumptions about reading, writing, teaching and learning and the second is the appropriate role of teachers and teacher-researchers in fostering and interpreting these changes. So far we have observed changes in the accuracy and complexity of adults' assessments of their own abilities as readers, writers and learners, as well as changes in learners' knowledge of the forms and functions of different texts and of what's entailed in reading and writing for different audiences and purposes. Furthermore, adults sometimes begin to see their own abilities as less fixed and more malleable: they reassess the factors that contribute to and constrain their own and others' (including their children's) learning, and question their own assumptions about the relative merits of one-to-one teaching and learning as opposed to participating in a class or community of learners. Changes in beliefs may include a more critical perspective on literacy and on its cultural uses and effects, and these changes may in turn be reflected in revised plans and in adults' processes and patterns of literacy practices in everyday life.

Literacy Practices

Our second dimension of adult development is literacy **practices**, the range and variation of literacy activities which learners engage in their everyday lives. We include here the contexts in which adults, individually or collaboratively, use some form of written language: the types and uses, settings, and modes of engagement. By looking for literacy outside of formal educational contexts, researchers found a variety of settings in which literacy is acquired spontaneously by individuals in response to newly perceived needs in their lives. Changes in the practices of adults who are attending programs thus do not necessarily reflect program-based learning, nor should we assume that individuals who attend literacy programs live in static environments.

A recurring theme in the literature and in adults' perceptions of practices is the distinction made between literacy in and out of "school." At issue here are the school histories and expectations of adult learners, the current school experiences of their children, and the extent to which adult educational programs resemble school. Defining family literacy as "performing school-like literacy activities within the family setting," according to Auerbach (1989), makes the realities of family life an obstacle to learning. When family literacy is defined as including a range of "activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life, the social context becomes a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning." Critiquing the assumptions behind the "transmission of school practices model," Auerbach shows the complexity of the ways literacy practices are distributed and shared in immigrant homes where children and their parents engage in the reciprocal or "two-way" support systems and stresses the importance of parents becoming their children's advocates at school.

"Documenting adults' reading and writing through protocols and interviews makes literacy processes visible and accessible for discussion and analysis"

Documenting changes in literacy practices with adult learners over time is obviously a complex process. We have seen that adults incorporate new types and uses of literacy into their daily lives, or do what they have already been doing more frequently or with different modes of engagement. What was done individually sometimes becomes a collaborative process, while previously supported reading and writing becomes, by choice, an activity accomplished independently. Some shifts may be only indirectly attributable to new uses of written language, but may reflect changes in life patterns which are significant byproducts of literacy learning. For example, adults may take new roles in their own children's learning – becoming advocates or participants at school; they may become members of community, consumer, social or political action groups, or take advantage of new resources or support systems. Some changes may be individual, others collective. Forms of action may include not only individual changes in accomplishing literacy-related tasks, but also may signal new roles in class, in the literacy program, and in the immediate or broader community (Auerbach 1990). Finally, tracing changes in practices also involves tracking themes or patterns related to content: the subjects that adults in particular settings find meaningful to read and write about, their substantive analyses and interpretations of important issues.

Reading and Writing Processes

In the third dimension of development we include more specific information on how adults use oral and written language **processes**, i.e., adult learners' repertoires of ways to manage

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particular reading and tasks, and the products of these transactions.

The processes dimension of literacy development highlights readers' and writers' behaviors immediately before, during and after reading and writing, and how these behaviors reflect adults' beliefs. Documenting adults' reading and writing through protocols and interviews makes literacy processes visible and accessible for discussion and analysis not only by teachers and tutors but also by the learners themselves. Changes over time in processes of reading and writing may be observed in adults' more confident approaches to a range of reading and writing tasks, more efficient and effective use of a wider range of specific moves and strategies, and more intentional selections of processes appropriate for specific purposes. Adult readers and writers become increasingly able to deal with more complex tasks and aware of alternatives, i.e., different ways to accomplish their goals. Some of these processes are observable even in group settings as adults collaboratively construct the meanings of texts. In addition to, and as evidence of, changes in reading and writing processes, the texts adults produce yield information about literacy practices and adults' knowledge and perspectives on the issues, events and problems in their everyday lives.

"For most adult learners who come to programs, the desire for enhanced self-esteem is implicit in many of their stated and unstated goals."

Learners' Plans

The fourth dimension, **plans,** attempts to capture what adults themselves indicate they want to learn – their overall intentions as well as more specific goals – and the ways they go about making learning happen within the instructional context. We know that adult learners' goals in entering literacy programs are often not congruent with what funders or program designers envision. Planning and setting goals are sometimes formalized when adults enter literacy programs, though in most cases the processes of negotiation and decision-making are ongoing. These processes are a function of complicated relationships among adult learners and their own learning, their teachers, tutors and co-participants in classes, and their co-workers, family members and other community members.

When adults who enter programs are given the opportunity at the outset to explore a range of possibilities, they typically go beyond a general interest in "becoming better readers" to name particular reading and writing tasks they hope to accomplish, often for specific purposes and audiences. Some come with a desire to learn more about a particular subject, e.g., African-American history, parenting or health. Many seek ways to deal with their own children's literacy and schooling, while others wish to participate or assume new roles and responsibilities in their families, workplaces or communities. Some are looking for community in the literacy program itself. Some seek economic improvements in their lives through new jobs or promotions, or by dealing more competently with personal finances and/or in their encounters with "the bureaucracy." For many the program offers the possibility of taking more control or ownership of their own learning. For most adult learners who come to programs, the desire for enhanced self-esteem is implicit in many of their stated and unstated goals.

Central to these planning and goal-setting processes are the perceived and enacted roles of tutor or teacher and adult learner. Decisions about what to do, how to use time, and who should do what (e.g., the roles and expectations of teachers and learners) are made and remade as instruction evolves. Learners may be taught with a pre-determined curriculum, the curriculum may be designed individually to address their stated learning goals, or teachers and tutors may invite learners to explore options and make informed choices about alternatives they may not have previously considered. Over time, adult learners' plans and goals appear to change in several ways. For adult learners (and perhaps for children and youth as well), choice and control may be critical to learning.

Documenting changes in their plans include identifying new goals, becoming more aware of what is involved in accomplishing these goals, and determining new priorities. Adults' goals may change from general to more specific short or long-term goals. Adults may become increasingly aware of constraints or obstacles to change, in themselves and in their situation, and they may develop strategies for dealing with these constraints or obstacles. Other changes may include more self-directedness, enhanced belief in self-efficacy, willingness to take risks, increased feelings of safety or comfort as a learner, and a propensity to assert plans or goals without explicit prompting. Changes in goals may also reflect changes in other dimensions, such as in knowledge of the functions and forms of written language acquired through experience and interaction with others, in and out of literacy programs. For example, in an initial interview an adult may indicate that she can already read the newspaper. Later she may name reading the newspaper as a goal, having become more acquainted with the parts of the genre or with new ways to interpret written information, and/or wishing to participate differently in social situations where newspaper information is exchanged and discussed.

"For adult learners, choice and control may be critical to learning. "

Conclusion

Alternative forms of assessment support teachers and learners in working in a more co-investigative fashion, embedding assessment in the daily experiences of teaching and learning. Literacy portfolios, for example, provide a structure for documenting ongoing activities and thus for tracking changes in literacy learning over time. These processes help practitioners and learners themselves to construct new images of the "living literacy" of adults – images built on assumptions of dignity and competence, of literacy as reflective and self-critical practice, and of learning as participatory. They require that we make problematic not only our notions of *what counts as development*

but also our *methods of inquiry* – the ways we compose, elaborate and critique our own frameworks and assessment practices.

Understanding literacy development in adulthood thus requires a rethinking of current assumptions about the needs and capabilities of so-called low literate adults, about underlying conceptions of literacy, and about the nature of learning in adult life. Working together, we need to construct richer conceptual frameworks that encompass adults' beliefs, practices, language processes and plans. This process calls for new relationships between adult learners and their own knowledge and literacy. Many people who work directly with learners in the field are concerned about a ceiling on expectations for these adult learners who come late to literacy, and about the possibility that programs, even the most enlightened, serve to reproduce inequities in much the same way as the lowest tracks in high schools become permanent repositories for students who have not made it in the system. There may be a great deal to be gained if the processes of knowledge generation can be shared, and if our methods capture and value more of the complexities of human experience.

(This article is based on research conducted as part of The Adult Literacy Evaluation Project at the Literacy Research Center, University of Pennsylvania, and supported by the Philadelphia National Bank, The Mayor's Commission on Literacy, the UPS Foundation, and the Graduate School of Education.)

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Portfolio Assessment Software

Portfolio based assessment provides a rich, formative picture of student achievement and reveals not only what a student has learned, but how he or she is learning. By collecting and evaluating actual student work, a teacher can create a clear authentic picture of an individual's strengths and weaknesses. Portfolios can be used to document assessment with specialists, counselors, administrators, parents and students.

However, while the advantages of portfolios and authentic assessment are clear, organizing and managing the wealth of information collected for each student can become an overwhelming task. Now, portfolio assessment software, like the Grady Profile, makes it possible to maintain a portfolio efficiently by allowing educators to collect and organize actual exhibits of student work: text (comments, journal entries, anecdotes, reflections), sound (reading, talking, singing), graphics (writing, math, art), and video (solo or group performances). Students and family members may enter evaluations as well as the teacher and there are subject cards and over 100 pages available for learner objectives. Password-protected security limits what authorized users may see and change in the program.

For further information about portfolio assessment software, contact Chip Carlin, LVA-New York State (607-273-0634; Internet: Chiplvany@aol.com).

For information on Grady Profile software contact Aurbach & Associates, Inc., 9378 Olive Street Road, Suite 102, St. Louis, MO 63132-3222; phone 314-432-7577.

(Thanks to Aurbach & Associates for permission to reprint the above information on portfolio software.)

Assessing Workplace Literacy: Asking New Questions

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Project REACH is a basic skills enhancement program for New York State employees jointly sponsored by the Civil Service Employees Association, Inc. and the Governor's Office of Employee Relations. REACH received a grant from the National Institute for Literacy to research alternative ways to assess workplace literacy needs. Six researchers observed and interviewed over seventy-five workers at six sites. The following article highlights some of their findings and the new questions their research raises about assessment.

For the National Institute for Literacy Study, we conducted observations and interviews with front-line employees at six worksites: cleaners and custodians at three sites, nurses' assistants in a metropolitan hospital, developmental aides in a center for the developmentally disabled, and clerks in a government office. This research was absolutely fascinating. Each site was unique with its own culture and communication patterns. Our goal was to assess employees' basic skills needs within the context of their work. In our search for alternative assessment approaches, we arrived at several important principles but no easy answers. Our final report is entitled "Asking New Questions." This article highlights a few of our findings and then poses the new questions.

First, we found that the front-line workers we observed were all able to perform their current jobs well. In fact, we observed more people who were over-qualified for their positions than under-qualified. Their sources of motivation were more powerful factors in their performance than their basic skills levels. For many custodians, proprietary pride in "my building" or "my floor" was a source of motivation. It was very frustrating for them to be moved to another space without explanation or to be prevented from doing a thorough job. For nursing assistants and developmental aides, helping another person in need was highly rewarding and motivating. The clerks were the one group in the study whose motivation often came from outside the work itself. With the support of their supervisors, they had elaborate "sunshine clubs" to celebrate birthdays, showers, etc. This helped break up the monotony of their unrelenting paperwork.

The clerks were the only worksite in which paperwork, reading and writing were central to the job. In all the other sites these requirements were more or less peripheral to the main job. In the most extreme example we found a "world without words." The researcher observing railroad car cleaners on the night shift concluded: "What really goes on is difficult to capture on paper – the hours of walking through the trains picking up scraps of paper, cups, candy/gum/chips wrappers, etc. or the hours of scrubbing and mopping. There isn't even much dialogue that goes on during the work – the work is done very independently. Personal conversations go on during little breaks, if at all. In short, I feel like I observed a tremendous amount of activity that doesn't amount to much in words." Reading, writing, speaking were largely irrelevant to completing this work.

Two forces did create a need for higher skill levels: 1) the desire to pass civil service exams for advancement, and 2) rapidly changing job requirements in some State agencies.

In State jobs, civil service exams are a very powerful assessment system. For example, Grade 6 clerks have to pass a highly competitive written exam to get their job while Grade 5 and 7 cleaners and janitors do not. However, to advance beyond these entry-level positions, they all have to pass fairly rigorous exams. Literacy and test-taking skills were important barriers – but not the only barriers – to advancement. Some custodians did not want to advance to "desk jobs." They preferred hands-on work. In other cases, cutbacks and other organizational factors had reduced advancement opportunities severely.

The accelerating rates of change in some New York State agencies were creating some new skills needs as well. For example, the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities is closing down its large developmental centers and moving clients into smaller community residences. This change places greater individual responsibility on the developmental aides who must function in teams to meet the clients' needs. Also, new record-keeping requirements will require more sophisticated writing skills.

In the sites engaging in "Quality Through Participation," we noted the need for higher level skills in order to participate effectively in teams. These skills included having the skills and confidence to speak up at meetings as well as knowing how to handle conflict. Needless to say, these skill needs extended beyond the front-line workers to their supervisors and managers as well.

When we began this research project, we had planned to produce a definitive handbook on alternative assessment techniques for workplace literacy. We wanted a way to understand the organizational context so we could assess employees' capabilities in context. As we researched the six organizations and refined our thinking, we came to believe that organizational assessment for workplace literacy should be part of an on-going collaborative process. It is a process of helping all the stakeholders in an organization ask critical questions about skills upgrading and organizational barriers and incentives to learning. Ideally, the assessment builds a foundation for long-range planning.

Our report concludes with important questions a workplace literacy assessment needs to answer:

- What is the social and organizational context for using basic skills?
- How do workers perceive their needs for basic skills?

- What are organizational and social barriers and incentives to learning?
- If the workplace is trying to solve a problem, is it a literacy problem?
- Who are the stakeholders? How will they agree on defining and addressing the problem?
- What are the short and long-term solutions? How will we know we're progressing?
- Is individual assessment needed? At what point?

Our most important conclusion about assessment is that organizational literacy programs require organizational assessments. If a workplace is trying to address workplace problems in a literacy program, the *first* most critical step is to assess the organization's needs — not the individual employees. This organizational assessment requires an active partnership among the stakeholders: the union, management, front-line supervisors, potential program participants, training officers, educational providers, and others as appropriate.

Only after the organization is assessed does it make sense to move onto what we usually think of as assessment, that is, assessment of the individual. To assess the individual first implies that the individual's skills are the cause of the problem. Our findings support management theorists such as Deming who state that usually only 15% of organizational problems are related to employee skills and 85% are caused by the system.

As educators we need to be careful about promising to fix problems that have nothing to do with skills, and we want to guard against blaming employees for problems they don't control. In educating people for business results this useful formula summarizes an important principle (from the book *Training for Impact* , Robinson and Robinson, 1989):

Education or Training	X	The Business Environment	=	The Business Result

In other words, learning that is reinforced on the job will contribute to business results. But by the same formula, any education or training times zero support back on the job will result in *zero business results*. Improving people's skill levels may create personal results but won't affect the business unless the business supports those new skills.

Copies of the full report *Assessing Workplace Literacy: Asking New Questions* is available from Ira Baumgarten, CSEA/LEAP, One Lear Jet Lane, Latham, NY 12110, phone 518-785-4669.

. . . . . From the Editor's Desk . . . . . .

LVA-New York State's Director of Education, Ginny Gilbertson, has compiled an annotated bibliography on alternative assessment for adult literacy. Most of these readings have sections on assessment of perceived literacy gains and transference of literacy skills to real life tasks and/or assessment of perceived affective gains.

The annotated bibliography is posted to the America Online Adult Literacy & Education Forum (in the Programs and Training area— Assessment Folder). If you're not currently linked to America Online and would like free software, call 800-827-6364. There is a monthly minimum charge for connecting to the network. For additional information about America Online and the Adult Literacy Forum contact Chip Carlin at 607-273-0634.

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An Assessment Overview

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Education and training programs use assessment information to make decisions about program components, to assess student development and the attainment of student goals, and to measure success of the program as a whole. Like the other writers in this publication, I will focus on the use of assessment information to make decisions about student development.

A great deal has been written lately about the need to *change* how we assess in education and training programs. This new assessment needs to be informative, believable, and fair. However, while many of us have no problem with the new measurement practices being fair, few can accept that all present users of test information will find the results of new forms of assessment either believable or informative. The issue of believability is crucial to the future of these new assessments.

Information about individual student development is used to inform decisions which fall into two broad categories: progress within a program and completion of a program and transition to something else. Assessing student development through a program or curriculum, and assessing student development in order to make decisions about movement out of a particular curriculum and into something else each require appropriate measures and instruments. Portfolio assessment, for example, is a measure of student development within an area of study. This powerful assessment tool is appropriate for informing decisions about movement through a program, but is inappropriate to measure program completion or certification of program goals.

Although "learning gains" — based on the use of standardized test scores— are widely accepted by policy makers and often accepted by program managers, they are also a point of contention within the education community. The argument centers around whether the questions on these tests and the form of the questions actually measure learning. Inappropriate claims for the data provided by standardized testing along with "over interpretation" of the test results have led to a questioning of their use in general.

For "alternative assessments," the major hurdle is that their indications of student development are not as easily understood or believable as the information gleaned from more traditional assessment. While many educators argue that numeric data is objective and therefore better, this is not true. Choices about what to ask, how to word the stem of the question, which alternatives to include as answer choices, the number of items on a given curricular domain, etc. render all testing subjective. If I ask you what time it is I may never know that you are aware that it is snowing. Proponents of alternative modes of assessment argue that they give students the chance to indicate what they know and how well they know it. Judgments about the quality of the portfolio are not any more subjective than the judgments of learning based on standardized test scores. For example, one teacher can ask that another teacher select a random sample of portfolios (which have already been evaluated) and make an assessment of the quality of the contents and the validity of the first teacher's decisions about student development. If the two expert judges are in agreement about a random sample of portfolios, then it can be assumed that they will be in agreement about all of the portfolios in the group. The establishment of this "inter-rater reliability" has an established methodology in research.

"Proponents of alternative modes of assessment argue that they give students the chance to indicate what they know and how well they know it. Judgments about the quality of the portfolio are not any more subjective than the judgments of learning based on standardized test scores."

The United States bought into standardized measurement as a sole source of information in education and training programs to an extent unknown in other countries. The good news is that the use of alternative assessments has a long history in other countries, where the information gathered through their use is considered both believable and fair. The validity and reliability of these measures, through the application of sociological research techniques, has been established in those environments— allowing us to use other forms of assessment with a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in them. There is still no magic assessment tool which will provide all things to all people, but the ongoing, open discussion and exchange of our educational experiences and ideas will only improve the assessment choices in the future.

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Portfolio Assessment

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Traditionally, changes in literacy skills have been measured through the use of standardized, norm-referenced tests. While these tests are of some value in comparing state or national data, they are of limited value to the teacher or to the learner in an adult literacy program. In the past few years, interest has grown in the use of alternative assessments, such as criterion-referenced, competency-based, and curriculum-based assessments which more clearly assess the learner's progress against specific indicators or against the curriculum.

Portfolio assessment is an alternative performance assessment that has promise as an effective approach to tracking changes in literacy skills for adult learners. Portfolio assessment provides a system for evaluating the results of various alternative assessments (such as observations, self-ratings, writing samples, and cloze tests) as well as the results of norm-referenced tests to make instructional decisions and to track progress toward both individual and programmatic goals. Key to the successful use of portfolio assessments with adults is the active involvement of the adult learner through each step of the process—from determining portfolio contents through deciding procedures for evaluating these collections.

Portfolios may be particularly effective for several reasons:

- Portfolio assessment requires active and ongoing participation by the learner in evaluating the contents of his/her portfolio. Adult learning theory indicates that active involvement in the learning process is essential in developing self-esteem and skills necessary for self-directed learning.
- Successful portfolio assessment depends on the ongoing communication between the instructor and the learner in evaluating the portfolio contents. This communication also fosters a climate of mutual inquiry and encourages participants to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Portfolio assessments are useful in illustrating relatively minor changes in literacy skills. This is particularly important in working with adults reading at the lowest levels and those with limited English proficiency.

Portfolios can be an effective way to assess adult learning; however, instructors should be aware of several drawbacks to using portfolios. This type of assessment does not replace the use of norm-referenced tests since the portfolio contents are unique to the individual. Generally, portfolios are used in addition to norm-referenced assessments that are required by many funding agents. In addition, while instructors need to outline benchmarks that can be used to evaluate portfolio contents, it is not likely that the instructors will find "canned" benchmark examples that will serve their learners' specific needs or the requirements of the instructional program. Instructors will have to construct reliable examples that illustrate various levels of achievement. Finally, portfolio assessment is time-consuming. Instructors must work with learners to determine the portfolio contents and how it will be evaluated. They also must meet with each learner on a regular basis to review and evaluate the portfolio. Program developers considering the use of portfolios, therefore, should include sufficient time in their instructional plans to accommodate the requirements of this promising approach to assessment.

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